

Water Minister Declares WAR

Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry, Buyelwa Sonjica, has heralded the second decade of South Africa's democracy by declaring WAR that is Water Allocation Reform. While the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry (DWAF) dedicated the last ten years to removing backlogs with regards to access to safe water and sanitation, the second decade will be dedicated to ensuring fair access of water resources to all.

“Despite the major changes we have made over the past ten years of democracy, our natural resources are still largely in the hands of a relatively wealthy white (male) minority. This is a picture that has to change”, said Buyelwa at a workshop on water allocation reform in Pretoria in April. To initiate this process, the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry (DWAF) has launched the Draft Water Allocation Reform Framework. The framework suggests methods that could be used to take proactive steps to meet the water needs of historically disadvantaged individuals, women and the poor; ensure participation by these groups; and establish partnerships to build capacity to use water productively.

The measures needed to address the challenge are already in place. Existing water use has been registered across the country, and work has started to quantify available water in trial catchments and to determine the ecological Reserve, the amount of water required to safeguard the environment. The next step, the verification of water use claims, has already been initiated in the uMhlathuze, Inkomati and Olifants catchments.

This information will allow catchment management agencies, which are currently being established, to undertake the detailed work of considering water requirements and proposing the sharing of available water to meet them. One controversial aspect of this process is that, to balance the many demands for water for production, it might be necessary to re-allocate water between users, where some water may be taken from existing users to give to those who have none.

However, Sonjica assured that this would not be done without careful consideration and that there would be no “water grabbing”. “While it is important for the economic development of the country that water resources become available to a wider range of users, we need to make water available in a way that will sustain and grow the First Economy while allowing the Second Economy users to develop. This is a complex process. We will not serve the public interest if water is wasted or used unproductively.”

DWAF Director: Water Allocation Planning Ashwin Seetal provided further insight into the process. He explained that there are several underlying considerations. “Firstly, the way we allocate water can have serious political, social, economic and ecological consequences. Thus, the pace in which this allocation process occurs is extremely important.” If, for example, re-allocation of water is done too quickly, or haphazardly, the country may suffer economic or environmental damage as emerging users struggle to establish productive and beneficial uses of water. Conversely, if water re-allocations take

place too slowly, social and political pressures will force a quicker pace for water reform, which could destabilise the process.

Secondly, where water re-allocation of water needs to take place, it must consider the impact on stability, and optimise the beneficial use of water in the interest of the public. This means that the water allocation process will not focus solely on issues of equity. Rather, while addressing issues of equity, it will also support water uses that generate employment and growth. Beneficial use also means promoting a range of uses of water across a variety of sectors to support a diverse, robust and stable economy.

Importantly, any development must be undertaken in an ecological sustainable way. Also, since South Africa shares about 70% of its water resources with other countries, international agreements and obligations towards its neighbours will also have to be taken into account during the water allocation reform process.

To see the *Draft Position Paper on Water Allocation Reform*, visit: www.dwaf.gov.za



Historically disadvantaged people, especially women, will now gain access to water resources under the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry new water allocation reform initiative.